

Easter 5C  
Revelation 8-19 (12:1-17)

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May 1/2, 2010

*<sup>1</sup>A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. <sup>2</sup>She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. <sup>3</sup>Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. <sup>4</sup>His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. <sup>5</sup>And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; <sup>6</sup>and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.*

*<sup>7</sup>And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup>but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup>The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*

*<sup>10</sup>Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,  
“Now have come the salvation and the power  
and the kingdom of our God  
and the authority of his Messiah,  
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,  
who accuses them day and night before our God.  
<sup>11</sup>But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony,  
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.  
<sup>12</sup>Rejoice then, you heavens  
and those who dwell in them!  
But woe to the earth and the sea,  
for the devil has come down to you  
with great wrath,  
because he knows that his time is short!”*

*<sup>13</sup>So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. <sup>14</sup>But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. <sup>15</sup>Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. <sup>16</sup>But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. <sup>17</sup>Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.*

It is spring; a time of year which brings a sense of hopefulness and tender promise to even the crustiest of souls. The tulips lining the front of the church bring cheer to members and neighbors who slow as they pass, just to savor the beauty. The fruit trees surrounding the columbarium stretch their flowering limbs with such optimism and joy. Mating pairs of mallards and Canada geese scout the grounds like newlyweds, seeking the perfect nesting place for their soon-to-be families. Now in the midst of that promise and hopefulness, imagine that you have been given the opportunity to preach on the battle of Armageddon, the mark of the beast and the Whore of Babylon.

There is an incongruity in talking about such things on a spring day. But it occurs to me that it does provide an opportunity to fully experience the jarring contradictions that John uses to get his message across to the seven churches of Asia Minor. So join me if you will for a bumpy ride through the middle chapters of Revelation.

When we left Revelation last Sunday, we had cycled through the opening of the first 6 seals, which released a series of ominous horsemen, an image of the martyrs at rest and a scene of great and terrible judgment: the day of wrath. And then God called a time out and we found ourselves with the innumerable multitude gathered before the throne and the Lamb, singing praises and worshipping God.

At the beginning of chapter 8 the final seal is opened and there is silence in heaven for about half an hour. And then...seven angels appear and one by one begin to sound their trumpets. A new cycle of disasters is unleashed upon the earth: hail and fire, earthquakes, falling stars, smoke, the seas as blood, locusts, torture and death. After the 6th trumpet, just as after the 6th seal, God calls a time out. And God, through John's words, exhorts his people to faithfulness in the face of affliction and assures them that God will be faithful to them even in their persecution. When the seventh trumpet sounds, we again find ourselves in the presence of God and the Lamb, worshipping and singing praise. As the rest of the chapters unfold, we will see that John uses repeating cycles of disaster culminating with being drawn back into the presence of the Lamb as a call for repentance.

But also things get really interesting! In Chapter 12 we find this vision of a woman in the throes of giving birth. A dragon with seven heads and 10 horns waits at her feet to devour the child for whom she labors. But the child is snatched away to God and the woman flees to safety. A mighty heavenly battle ensues and the angel army led by Michael defeats the army of the dragon. The dragon is cast down. Satan, who once had power in heaven and on earth, is now confined to the earthly realm. Satan has been diminished, his realm circumscribed. And Satan is enraged. Liked a caged animal Satan pounces and attacks, going after the woman whom God protects.

Thwarted, Satan turns his evil intention to the rest of her children; that is, to the rest of God's people on earth. John describes an unholy alliance, an unholy trinity if you will: Satan, the beast of the sea and the false prophet. The followers of Satan are marked on the hand or forehead. The mark of the Beast itself is 666. Contrary to popular belief, 666 is not intended to identify a beast to come. John is using a common numbering device of his time to point a finger at existing evil, most likely at Nero, the Roman emperor. In doing so, John once again, and more stridently, alerts his readers to the evil intention of the kings and rulers of this world that would lure the people away from faithfulness to God.

Then the vision turns again to the presence of the Lamb and the same multitude described in Chapter 7. The followers of the Lamb also bear a mark: the mark of the name of the Lamb and his Father written on their foreheads. John makes it clear that all people will bear a mark of one kind or another. The unspoken question to the readers of John's time and to us is this: whose mark will you bear?

Then the vision turns to yet another series of disasters: plagues poured from each of seven bowls. These bowls of wrath are not predictions of future events. Like the plagues that beset Egypt, these images are designed to drive the evil to repentance and to set the faithful free. John uses these images for the sake of the life of the church: urging them to turn from idolatry and complacency and to persevere in the face of opposition.

In chapter 16 we get the first reference to the great battle of Armageddon. Armageddon is named for a real place in Israel where the enemies of God have historically been defeated or destroyed. And this would make sense to John's readers. Again the intention is not to set a time or a place for the annihilation of the wicked but to focus on their refusal to repent in the face of the plagues. Again John is asking his readers: Will you repent? Will you turn from your idleness and idolatry and once again be faithful to God and to the Lamb?

Now to the stuff of legends: the Whore of Babylon. Many a proper lady has hurled this moniker at the promiscuous home-wreckers in small towns across America. But to focus on the word "whore" or harlot as an indicator of sexual sin is to fall far short of John's aim here. Instead it helps to look at the description of the harlot the same way one looks at an editorial cartoon. The extreme, nearly absurd portrayal is designed to jolt the reader to attention, to awaken us from complacency, to alert us to re-examine who it is that we follow.

To John's readers the harlot represents the cities of Babylon, Ninevah, Tyre and Rome. Cities that equate violence with power; cities that lure with the seduction of wealth and commerce; cities that breed greed and arrogance. What's more, Babylon destroyed the first temple and Rome the second...the harlot represents all that stands in opposition to God.

The harlot herself sits astride the great seven-headed beast of Satan. She is drunk on the blood of saints and raises a golden chalice of abomination. This vision of the harlot is a depiction of arrogance, violence and the love of wealth in John's time and in ours. In the last of chapter 17, evil self-destructs. The great beast which the harlot rides destroys her. Consumes her flesh and burns her up in fire. Evil destroys its own.

And finally in chapter 18 we see the funeral of Babylon or the harlot. Like all the visions thus far...the funeral is yet another call for repentance. The funeral of Babylon shows what will come of the social currents and institutions built on the seduction of luxury, license and power. They will not stand. They will end. John rattles the cages of the readers who have fallen into pagan practices or who have been lulled into false security by their prosperity. John says that they too will come under divine judgment.

John takes a long time to say it and gives us many, many visions to illustrate it. But John understands that if simply asked to choose between good and evil, the answer seems obvious. But, for churches that have become complacent in their prosperity or have given into pagan practices to be more socially acceptable, the distinction between good and evil has blurred. So John uses vivid and graphic images and contrasts to arrest the reader's attention and to impel them to action. John wants the reader to be able to distinguish between the true God and surrogate gods, between faithfulness and unfaithfulness.

One contrast that perhaps best captures our imagination is the contrast between the woman who gave birth in the earlier chapter and the harlot. The woman represents God's people, God's church on earth. In chapter 19 she is described as holy Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb. Her child is Jesus, the Word of God, the witness of God's faithful people. By startling contrast, the harlot represents all that is seductive in the world, all that lures us into false peace and satisfaction. The harlot begets abomination, impurity and the pursuit of surrogate gods.

The woman, the church of God, is protected by God. Her child, her issue cannot be destroyed by all the power of evil in the world. By contrast, the harlot is consumed by her own beast. She bears within herself the capacity for her own destruction. She issues nothing that will last.

The deep contrast in the images might seem extreme, even absurd. But these images serve a purpose: to jolt us out of complacency and into repentance and faithfulness in the one true God. Can we so easily identify the things in our world that seduce us into choosing comfort and conformity, that lull us into complacency and idleness of heart? John asks his readers to make a choice. John asks us to make a choice. Whom will we follow? Which mark will we bear? In our baptism we have been marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are swept up in the promise of resurrection with Jesus Christ. But that does not absolve us from making serious decisions about how we should live. In the end, perhaps that is the most jarring message Revelation has to offer. Amen.